



Hot Totty

a story by Brooks Kohler

From the top of Hartmann Hill, we felt like giants. Before us, the long expanse of creation stretched out. Below us, farmhouses lay scattered amongst the trees and golden fields of corn. High above, large fluffy clouds sailed, casting in their wakes rolling shadows that caused the landscape to appear to signal with flashing lights and changing hues.

It was August, the first week of August. My skin was brazen gold. My hair was bleached. Beside me, my best friend, Totty Little, sat perched on her bike. She was sucking a cherry pop, the white stick bouncing around as if it were a conductor's wand and nature to her symphony. I could smell the cherry; it was sweet, and I turned to her. Totty was in a daze, captured by some thought, probably not related to the day.

"Got another one of them?"

"Last one," she said, the ball in her cheek rising and shifting as she rolled the pop from one side of her mouth to the other. She plucked it out and held it up, studied it for a bit, and then shoved

it back in. "You think it's gonna rain?" she asked

"Naw," I replied, squeezing the hand grips of the bike. "The moon was holdin' water last night. Besides, the leaves are turned down. Can't rain."

"I sure wish it would. It's hot."

"Yeah, I know."

Totty looked at me and grinned.

"Hey! Race ya!" she said suddenly.

She jumped up and slammed her foot down hard on the pedal. She had caught me off guard, and before I knew it, she was cruising down the thatch road that led to the top of Hartmann Hill.

"No, you don't!" I shouted. With a firm push, I started after her. Totty laughed the whole way down, screeching and screaming with glee as the warm wind pushed her hair back. It wasn't long before I was beside her, and we both just smiled and enjoyed the ride. One of the great things about Hartmann Hill is that it ramps to the sky and evens out for half a mile at the bottom. Getting to the top required walking the bikes, but coming down was effortless, a reward for the hard work required. So,

we just cruised when we evened out.

Totty threw her arms high into the air and held up her palms, flat to the sky, as if the sun itself was giving them little kisses. I would have done the same, but earlier in the summer, I had taken a bad fall with such a stunt. The scab on my knee had now turned to a pink scar that wouldn't tan. Needless to say, my lesson was learned, but Totty wouldn't fall, this day nor ever. She would remain, hands reaching to the sky, her hair blowing in the warm breeze as she effortlessly glided along for the remainder of the momentum. During this time, she became quiet, and I pedaled hard to get ahead of her a bit, so as to look at her.

To me, Totty was a freckled-faced angel, a strawberry blonde with bony elbows and flaring fingers. In the summer, she was always outside: first to the swimming hole at Cooper Creek, first at the ball park, first on the trestle searching for flowers. Okay, I didn't search for flowers, but she did. That was just one of the things that made her special. Totty was what my mother called "a little lady," and

to me she was my lady, even though I was too young to realize it.

The bikes began to slow, and the humming of the tires began to grow more silent. Totty opened her eyes and looked at me. She said nothing -- just pedaled -- and together we rode to a place where a large elm made the road shady and somewhat cool, despite the fact the humidity took no pity on us. Even in the shade it wrapped around us, and we slowed and parked our bikes. In doing so, I reached for a little flask of water I carried. "Wanna sip?" I asked before taking a drink.

Totty smiled and plucked the sucker from her mouth. She took a drink, a long drink. The water dribbled down her chin and into what would one day be cleavage. Totty caught me looking and smiled, but in a way as to say, "Boys?" She handed the flask back to me and wiped her mouth. I, in turn, took a drink. Immediately, I could taste the cherry pop and finished off a long chug with a burp.

"Gross!" snapped Totty, walking to the shade.

"Compliments to the chef, my dad says."

“Where does your dad eat? A barn?”

“No, he eats at where your folks do there at The Goose Lodge on Saturday nights and The Olive Branch on Sundays.”

Totty laughed and took seat beneath the elm tree. “I was teasin’,” she said.

“Oh,” I replied, frazzled a bit, not by her, but by myself for not getting it. Walking over, I took a seat next to her. On the ground before me, a group of carpenter ants was scouring about, each shiny one looking for its next meal. “We shouldn’t sit here too long,” I said.

“Why?”

“The sap from this here worthless elm is driving these ants here crazy.”

“It’s not worthless,” Totty replied, looking up and back at the bark. “It’s perfect.”

“A perfect ant trap.” I said and stood up.

Totty sat silent and returned to whatever it was she was thinking about. The only hint that she was even near was the clacking sound of the hard candy as it ricocheted off her teeth.

The elm was a favorite place of ours. Two years earlier, we had carved our initials on it; they were still fresh, and sometimes Totty would point out how her “T” looked like a cross “on account” that she hadn’t made her horizontal line even with the vertical. “Basic geometry skills at their weakest,” she would remind me.

Totty’s mom was a substitute teacher, a woman skilled in the complexities of math. She had helped me once before with my studies, but after several weeks had passed, she informed my parents that math was highly overrated and that they needn’t worry and that I’d be fine. She never worked with me again, and Totty took over, showing me little tricks and ways to get a sure fire A, but after the first couple of test results were D’s and F’s, Totty said that she had done some studying on her own and had come to the same conclusion as her mother: math was highly overrated, and that as a student, destined for bigger and better things, I should simply focus on getting C’s. “They weren’t the best, but at least you’ll pass,” she said.

That was just one more thing I liked about her. Totty always looked out for me. And, at times I felt sorry for her because she knew everything about a worthless subject like geometry, but she didn't know anything about how to tell when it was going to rain by looking at the moon and leaves or that the best time to go searching for night crawlers was after a heavy rain.

"Where you goin'?" she asked.

"To pee."

Totty put the sucker back into her mouth and again returned to her thoughts. Modesty was a privilege that man did not acquire at birth. If Totty hadn't been around, I would have stood right there, in the shade, next to the road with my back turned, unzipped, and let loose! But I didn't. Out of respect, I walked away until I was concealed by a patch of bushes and a few malnourished cedars.

Standing there, I noticed a tractor running in the distance. Men worked in the fields. I could hear them yelling something. I listened closely and then chuckled.

I'd heard my own dad use those same words before. Mom told me not to repeat them. She said they were bad, very bad, and that God didn't like them. But, she also said that fathers were allowed to use those words only so many times during the year before God would strike him dead! When I asked how many times, she never answered. She'd just walk and say, "Don't use those words! Bad, very bad!"

When I returned, Totty was still sitting, deep in thought.

"Somebody's gonna get struck dead if they don't watch it," I said, walking back toward Totty, full of myself.

"Who?" she asked.

"One of those farmers out in the field. Hear that tractor?"

I was silent. Totty listened.

"Yeah, so?"

"While I was pee'n, I heard one of them farmers sayin' the words reserved only for fathers."

"The what?" asked Totty. She held her pop up

to me as if she was going to throw it.

“You know – the words.”

Totty was silent. She just stared. I was perplexed. She had to know. All the kids knew, didn’t they? I mean I had never asked anyone, but I was sure with her mom being educated she knew about the *words*. Totty *had* to know.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she snapped, putting the pop back into her mouth.

“Yeah, you do. The *words*. The ones that if a dad says a certain amount of times a year, he’ll get struck dead?”

Totty burst out laughing. The pop shot out of her mouth like a cannon ball and she caught it before it hit the ground. “That’s the silliest thing I’ve heard,” she said, continuing to laugh. “Words? Really?”

“It’s true!”

“Then what are those words? I’ve never heard them.”

“I can’t say.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ll get struck dead! That’s why!”

Totty stopped laughing, and released few little “hee and huhs” as she rolled the pop around in her mouth. She was thinking, wanting to know what I knew. Then her eyes squinted a bit the way, a person looks when she stares at the sun. After plucking out the pop, Totty pointed it at me and asked, “You’re not a dad, are you?”

“A what?” I exclaimed. “Have you lost your mind? I’m only eleven!”

“Then if you tell me,” she said coyly, “you won’t get struck dead – now will you?”

She grinned and waited. I thought for moment, wanting to give her an answer -- but what? Totty was right about most other things. Maybe she was right about this one, too. And, I knew that if I didn’t tell her, she might not want to go riding anymore. She could be a vindictive, little sprite when she wanted. So, I puffed out my chest and gave her a stern look.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll tell you, but I’ll have to whisper.”

Totty leaned forward and did a quick clap as if she had won a prize. I walked to her and leaned down. Putting my palm to her ear, I whispered. With each word, Totty covered her mouth with a giggle, sometimes turning her head and giving me a funny look I wasn't used to seeing.

When I was finished, Totty remained in her fascinated state. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a fresh pop, neatly wrapped and crimped with a twist at the top. She held it up to me. It was like gold.

"You told me you were out."

"Just remembered I had it."

The first thought that should have gone through my mind was a want and desire to accuse Totty of lying to me, but it wasn't. Instead, I was somewhat happy, almost overjoyed. If she could forget she had something as precious as a cherry pop in her pocket, maybe she'd forget the words of death I had just whispered in her ear.

"Thanks!" I said, taking the pop.

Totty let go and leaned back against the tree.

Before I knew it, my mouth was experiencing one of the greatest pleasures on earth, the sweet sensation of a cherry pop. I rolled it about, let the stick bounce up and down, and swallowed the juice which was as good as anything I'd ever tasted.

"You ready to go?" I asked, peering down at her.

Totty had a look of discomfort on her face. Her forehead was beaming with little droplets of sweat.

"I'm hot," she said, standing up.

"Yeah, I guess so."

I started to walk toward my bike, but as I did Totty grabbed my arm, plucked out her pop and my pop, and with surprise and without any sort of respectability for the fact that I might not want her to, she planted a kiss on my lips. Then, while I was still in a state of disbelief, she shoved the pop back into my mouth and continued on toward the bikes.

Instead of following, I just stood. Something had changed. I looked to the sky and watched the clouds churn across. Then, I peered to Hartmann

Hill where Totty and I were earlier sitting on our bikes, contemplating the world below. I looked at the ground and watched the carpenter ants plying their trade. And then, I looked at Totty and focused. She was straddling the bike, her bony frame slouching as she pondered on something far and away from the moment. That was just one of the things I liked about her, the way she could achieve something and then jump right back into where she had left off.

Totty caught me staring and smiled. It woke me up, and we rode home.

THE END

“Hot Totty” (Originally published in 2007 by *Senior Views*, a magazine based in Anna, Illinois.) Published in 2021 by Brooks Kohler.

This story is fiction. Similarities to any person living or deceased are coincidence.